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Editorial: Understanding our foul mouths

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Opinion (https://mainecampus.com/category/opinion/) | April 16, 2018

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The language we use matters, regardless of how small individual words seem in the moment. It's too easy to disconnect from a place of privilege and safety and ask, "Who cares?" The answer to that misguided question is people — living, breathing people who face aggression because we let coined phrases and words come out before really thinking about them.

And that's the best scenario. There are always those incidences where language is used as a weapon, meant to degrade or devalue certain people with the powerful backing of social context. Words don't translate in a vacuum, free from our social landscape. That's why searching for the "real" definition of a word in the dictionary is nothing more than a ploy distracting from the real point — that words have multiple meanings, and many of them aren't pretty.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is a foundation dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism and other forms of hate. Rosalind Wiseman wrote for the ADL about the "meaninglessness" of hateful jokes, "If the joke is meaningless... why are you saying it? What are you are trying to communicate?" This question isn't comfortable, but it's important work toward understanding why we talk the way we do. Racist, sexist or other hateful jokes are brushed off as simply that — dark humor meant to elicit some laughs. But the punchline in all those gags is somebody's identity, and people are beginning to realize the harms these seemingly small comments can cause. Many people have already begun to reverse some of this loaded language, or at least work to redefine it. The phrase "like a girl," often used to put a cap on a compliment for a girl or to degrade boys who aren't performing to gendered standards, has been dropped by many and reclaimed by others. Similar words are changing shape among the LGBTQ community, for example.

Despite this progress, some words are still off limits for most people. The N-word is one of those. On March 27, an Atlanta suburb in Georgia declared April "Confederate History Month." The city commission held a meeting that same day to allow the public to talk about this decision. In this meeting, a white man and former board member, Larry Johnson, used iterations of the N-word several times while addressing a working official and black man, Rodney McCord.

The Washington Post reports that McCord was "immediately" caught off guard by the comment. As seen in video of the commission meeting, McCord tried to interject and was quieted by other board members. Douglas Hollberg, the board's chairman, told McCord to "...please let [Johnson] get to the point so we can move on." McCord managed to voice his concerns about the language in the meeting, stating to the room, "I'm not going to sit here and let this man use that type of language. And if nobody else is offended, then I am."

Hollberg's attempts to quiet McCord's concerns were dismissive and damaging. Most of the board members present were white, and therefore disqualified from deciding whether Johnson's statements were offensive or not. It is in the hands of the target whether certain language is hurtful, and McCord made it repeatedly clear that he was uncomfortable with the racialized slurs. Johnson told CNN that "he felt remorse" about the reception of his comments, but that he would not apologize to

McCord until he received apology for being interrupted.



The effects of language are obvious on an individual level, but zooming out reveals the larger structure that plays into our worldview. Word choices by journalists and news outlets shape perceptions of stories and people. During March this year, the town of Austin, Texas grappled with a series of bombings perpetrated by Mark Conditt. Two people were killed and five were injured before Conditt committed suicide.

Initial coverage of the bombings did not mention terrorism, sparking controversy over the often politicized use of the word. White suspects are much less likely to be labeled terrorists, compared to people of color. Brian Manley, the interim police chief spearheading the firsthand reports of Conditt, originally called him “a challenged young man.” Manley later decided to call Conditt a domestic terrorist, with the smart acknowledgment that terms such as “domestic terrorist” come with legal distinctions that shouldn’t be taken lightly. Manley’s decision to claim the terrorist label for Conditt further strengthens the severity of the crimes committed.

Language is just one method of communication, but it’s the most permeating. We use it, hear it, see it in writing and share pages worth of it with the click of a button. However each of us feels about the political correctness debate, it cannot be dismissed that words mean something to people, and to our culture. The words we use inform our views and opinions, and they affect others. They hurt or heal, and they influence. Being aware of this is the first step in making a coherent decision about what we let come out of our mouths, and how.

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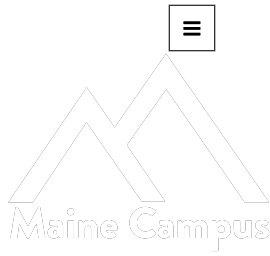
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